
[A blueprint for environmental racism](#)

In 1969, at the age of 3 my parents were forced to move from the home in which I was born, in a neighbourhood of people of all colours, ethnicity and even class, to a sand dune cleared of all its vegetation and left naked except for poorly constructed block houses with no internal electricity, plaster or ceilings and crowned with an asbestos roof.

We were moved because my family was classified in South Africa as coloured (Black), people of mixed descent. Because of our physical features we were treated differently by the State, which was an all white apartheid State.

The houses on a steep bank of loose sand void of vegetation were separated with nothing more than a few sheets of construction metal. As a view, we were cursed with having to look down upon the US-Mobil oil refinery, which externalized its toxic fumes onto local people of colour. The immediate result of this was injury not only to one's dignity and psychological well-being, but also physical damage to one's body. Without electricity we had to boil water on a primus stove, which I pulled down as a toddler and was drenched in boiling water and pain as my skin blistered and left my body attached to my clothes. With steep slopes and metal as retaining walls, disaster was soon to strike. As the first rains came my sister slipped down the bank onto the metal sheeting and her body gouged open. With the toxic fumes came asthma and I was part of the 52% of our local youth population – the highest formally recorded figure in the country – cursed by this. Because of the toxic fumes from the Mobil oil refinery and local Mondi paper mill, which was one of the main Anglo American subsidiaries, our normal growth was stunted. But more alarmingly as a young person, in an environment that was void of indigenous vegetation, where people were crammed into poor housing and where your view was dirty industry, your reality and outlook on life was warped. You could not imagine another world and you took a sick sense of pride in having to live amongst this reality of industrial brutality and destroyed nature.

This apartheid planning and environmental racism did not happen by chance. It was something that was constructed as corporate capital colluded with the State. Like slavery, apartheid planning needed both corporate greed and a state to facilitate and protect the wealth. More than a 150 years after slavery and two decades after the demise of apartheid, the reality is that these racist laws have resulted in the inhuman and illegal accumulation of wealth, which today is still protected by 'property rights' in many constitutions globally, including South Africa's very own. The State has set up systems to protect ill-gotten gains.

Critically, apartheid planning and the subsequent environmental racism is often thought of in the context of the openly racist National Party coming into power in 1948, and writing laws that forced the segregation of people. But this is not entirely correct. Environmental racism linked to planning can be traced back to the 1920's when the then British government created the first segregated city in Durban. The British plan was perfected and institutionalized by the apartheid government, which resulted in, what I often refer to as a "blue print for a township". A township is a place where black people were forced to reside by law, a place where I, and my family, were forced to move to and live

in 1969. So what does this blue print look like? It is poorly developed homes, void of indigenous vegetation, with dust roads, dirty industry on the fenceline, waste – toxic and municipal – dumpsites sites in your neighbourhood and for good measure a sewage works on your doorstep. This is the blueprint of apartheid planning.

When one speaks about environmental racism today, often the United States civil rights movement comes to the fore. This is because of how successful black people were during the 60's and 70's to challenge and document these violations of racism. It was easy then to make the step from civil rights to environmental rights and in the 80's environmental racism began as a discourse in the US. Coupled with this, the way in which academics such as Professor Bullard in a seminal work "Dumping in Dixie" highlighted how class and colour played a very important role as to where white administrations would place toxic dumpsites.

This narrative of environmental racism was therefore not a very difficult one to make in a newly emerging democratic South Africa in the early 1990's. Already people challenging for democracy and equality for all through struggles for a just housing, schooling, educational and health system could easily align with that of pushing back on environmental racism.

But despite these civil rights victories in the United States, the democratic victory in South Africa, and the very many progressive people aligned governments that have emerged, especially in places such as Latin America, the ongoing impacts of the "development project" leaves people and their land damaged.

Dirty coal-fired power stations in South Africa today result in the majority of deaths caused by outdoor air pollution amongst poor black communities in South Africa, rather than providing people with meaningful and affordable energy. In a democratic South Africa, more than 30% of South Africans live in energy poverty, i.e. they do not have sufficient energy for safe cooking and heating.

Large infrastructure projects such as the proposed Mphanda Nkuwa Dam, Friends of the Earth, Mozambique has warned, will destroy the lower Zambezi river and peoples livelihoods, not in exchange for energy for local people, but rather for the energy intensive and destructive industries in South Africa. Placing transmission lines in Mozambique to reach the poor is too expensive. Large monoculture plantations in KwaZulu Natal, a South African province, have magnified the impacts of the two year drought in South Africa, with those that use the least water being affected the most as their annual subsistence crops fail and their animals dropped dead. Unlike commercial mono agricultural farmers, there is no insurance to save them. But it has also been the large increase in monoculture plantations of predominantly eucalyptus trees in the 1980's in the KwaZulu Natal midlands that destroyed the labour intensive dairy industry, and forced rural black people to move to urban areas resulting in the intensifying of political violence between the urban and incoming rural people, resulting in thousands of deaths.

Presently, our global governments have capitulated to corporate power that will further entrench environmental racism, which will harm black communities and indigenous people the most. In the aftermath of another round of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change jamboree in December 2015, market mechanisms such as REDD have been entrenched in the outcome, making the future bleak for indigenous peoples, as their lands will be taken from them in the name of "saving the planet and forest" while their livelihoods are cut off and their waters are sucked up by plantations. Not one government stood up in Paris during the UN talks and said, "this will harm our people, we cannot abide by it". So the path that facilitates environmental racism has been agreed upon at a global level, to be implemented at a local level.

But like many of us who were relocated in the dark days of apartheid, credit has to be given to the older folk. For them another world was possible as they had experienced it, and many ensured that through the dark days of apartheid we as children were often reminded of this. Today, let us listen to the indigenous peoples of the world, and to those who live with the land and remember that another world is possible.

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